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A PLEA FOR OUTLINE DRAWING FOR LITTLE CHILDREN.

WHEN we who are now adults were little folks at school, we were set to draw ornaments from the flat in outline with a hard pencil. First we were allowed to sketch the design in loosely and lightly, but the moment came when we had to lay all experiment aside and draw it in boldly and carefully with a hard and unswerving line; "lining in," it was called. The painful memory of it clings to us yet.

We were next initiated into the mysteries of light and shade. A plaster of Paris cast was put up before us to be copied from. The cast was often soiled so that it was with difficulty we could make out the real shadows from the seeming ones. We had often to determine the place of the high light by wetting the prominent parts. Our drawings thus were executed with difficulty, and were, as you see, partly ideal, as we attempted to carry the gradations of light and shade farther than our eyesight or the condition of the cast would properly allow. Many of the drawings, when this was pushed to an extreme, came to resemble polished metal rather than plaster of Paris.

Success in this art meant further promotion to "still life"—to color; the painting of p'ots and pans and vegetables. When we reached this happy point, we looked upon ourselves as full-fledged artists.

The full sum of our ambition, however, was to paint a portrait. From a potato or cabbage to a human face was hardly a step at all. Our sitter had but to dehumanize himself or herself, banish all movement, and with it expression, which is but the movement of the face, reduce himself to still life, and we knew how to deal with him. Our education never aimed at more than this. Outside of school hours we made little irregular excursions into the country to sketch from nature, but this was not recognized as part of the school work, and it never amounted to much in any case.

Nowadays the public schools would upset all this, reverse the whole process, and begin where the old system left off—with the landscape. We have not quite made up our minds about the life-class. We look askance at plaster casts, and as for drawing from the flat, that is our *bête noire*. The child must now work with the brush, and all inclination toward outline must be stamped out as vice. He must work in *mass*.

What is this “mass drawing” that is talked about so much and so vaguely? It is not merely drawing larger or in a ruder way as opposed to painstakingly close and cramped work; everybody is now agreed that the little child should be encouraged to draw in a big, free way. The phrase is meant to suggest a sketchy manner—hit or miss—and is opposed to the working-drawing style in which things must show their articulations clearly, the contours admitting no hiatus. Nor is it drawing in well-defined silhouettes of color (“poster” effects, to use a vulgar word); as the phrase is used, it implies light and shade or the representation or suggestion of the third dimension. It seems to me that the phrase “mass drawing” involves two things closely allied to each other: (1) sketchiness, a touch-and-go manner distinguished from the tracing of contours; and (2) the representation of the third dimension = modeled surface = light and shade.

I shall attempt to show that we must not expect to find these characters dominant in child drawing, and that where they do occur they are not to be unconditionally encouraged.

We hear it said today that mass precedes outline. If that means that modeling comes before drawing, that it comes more naturally to the beginner, we agree. It is a more direct process to represent form by actual form than by lines and tints and shades. It is direct copying in the one case, and in the other case translation from the terms of three dimensions into the terms of two dimensions.

Drawing is always to some extent abstract. For this reason sculpture outruns painting in the earlier stages of art history. It reaches a high development, while the painting yet remains crude. Take the art of the Egyptians for an example. Compare

their painting with their sculpture. It is crude and conventional to the last degree. Witness their habit of drawing the human eye in front view, while the other features are seen in profile. Everywhere the Egyptian artists are hampered by the greater difficulty of delineation, and turn and twist things about till they get them into a convenient position to draw. They place the human body with the head in profile and eyes in front view; with the chest in front view and arms and legs in profile; the waistband again in front view, although the limbs are seen from the side. Their drawings remain almost barbaric in their simplicity, while their sculpture in its best moments almost rivals that of Greece. What it wants in movement it makes up in monumental repose. Here there are no anomalies. The artists achieve the ends they proposed to themselves, restrained it may be, but never thwarted or diverted from their purposes by the difficulties of their medium.

So with Greece, the sculpture far outruns the painting. There are vague stories of the miracles of Apelles and Zeuxis, but these we are not inclined to take upon trust. They are probably grossly exaggerated. If Cimabue's Madonna had perished, we should have had a similar story in more recent times. The Italians enthusiastically proclaimed that Cimabue rivaled nature, but his picture seems a poor, flat, unreal thing to us today. We prize it for quite different reasons from those to which it owed its popularity with the people of that day, for its still, sad nobility of expression, which it shared no doubt with many pictures of its time.

The only things that we have to go upon for Greek painting are one or two late Greek daubs done by common house-painters on the walls of Pompeii and the vase paintings. These latter are very important art works, though they cannot take rank with the best sculpture, and are done by very accomplished and reputed artists. They cover, too, a wide period of history. It would be an interesting inquiry to make a comparison between them and contemporary sculptures.

Now we know that the sense of form among the Greeks was carried to a high degree of refinement. Here, if anywhere, one

would think, were artists who would not be satisfied with rude outlines in lieu of modeled surfaces. Their sculptures were carried into the greatest detail; every swelling muscle and rounded bone was given with sufficient, and no undue, emphasis. These sculptures are models to us today.

Now let us turn to their paintings: black, flat figures on a red ground; or brick-red flat figures on a black ground; or black or brown outlines merely on a light ground in violent contrast; no modeling whatsoever anywhere; wiry lines for all the internal markings of the figures, wiry outlines bounding all the forms.

How can we explain this anomaly? It is only to be explained by the *difficulty of representation upon a flat surface*. This is sufficient to baulk the continued efforts of man for thousands of years.

Nor did any artist succeed in grappling with the third dimension in painting till late in Greek times. And on the fall of the ancient world the new acquirement was lost again for one thousand and five hundred years. The whole primitive, ancient, and mediæval world knew nothing of "mass" drawing. Outline filled in with flat bright color was the full extent of their scope.

Mass-drawing is thus seen to be a *modern art, the product of an advanced stage of artistic culture*. Even when it did come, it did not displace the outline, but lived peaceably side by side with it down through Renaissance times till our own day. Michael Angelo, preoccupied with modeled surface as no other painter has ever been, still retains the outline, and emphasizes and detaches his form by its means. The modern impressionists are, indeed, the first in history to do away entirely with the bounding line.

Edouard Manet, some forty years ago, was the first clearly to see that objects are relieved against each other as lighter or darker patches; the first clearly to distinguish his visual from his tactful percepts, and to eliminate the tactful.

This is impressionism, the expression of visual images without modification by tactful images. If Manet had been studying from the stained cast with us, he would not have cared to ask what was stain and what was shadow; if they looked alike to him they were the same.

Let me contrast Greek art and this modern picturesque art. The Greek was occupied with form. He loved the untrammeled form, preferred the nude, and treated drapery in such a way as to exhibit the figure. The horse even was divested of his trappings. Everything was arranged so that the tactual sense of the artist and of the onlooker should have the fullest exercise. The eye, the hand, could caress every shape. The modern schools do the opposite of this. Everywhere the form is broken, as in nature, with a hundred accidents. Things are at cross purposes. The form is interrupted by the drapery. The drapery is interrupted with pattern, with cross and shifting lights. Landscape (Turner) and cathedral (Joseph Pennell) are veiled with changing light and shadow and soft envelopes of air, so that here the shape appears for a moment and again it is lost. Modern impressionistic painting gives nowhere any satisfaction to the tactual sense, but everywhere constant play and pleasure to the visual. "This study of appearances and the effort to render them come late in the history of art," says Hamerton. "The complete knowledge of appearances is the sign of a very late state of civilization, implying most advanced artistic culture both in the artist and the public to whom he addresses himself."

We cannot expect the child to do what the most advanced artist could not do half a century ago—namely, distinguish his visual from his tactual perceptions. We cannot expect him to be an impressionist, and must be content to let him lag a little behind the artists of the time and begin somewhat farther back; not troubling much about light and shade, atmosphere, perspective, linear or aerial, and effects generally; gradually learning something about the shapes of things, and not worrying overmuch about their appearance. Perhaps the very tiniest little ones may begin even farther back still, with a kind of picture-writing which does not make any very serious attempt at representation at all, but is almost frankly symbolic. We must ask how far the individual student must recapitulate the art history of the race. That is a question that has never seriously been discussed, and it seems to me one that we might attempt to deal with now.

Let me essay to sketch that art history in a broad way, and it is only these broad characters that need immediately concern us.

We may roughly divide art into three periods, which we might call "early," "middle," and "advanced." In the first the art of savages and primitive folk, Mexican manuscripts, red Indian drawings, Egyptian papyrus and mummy cases, Greek vases, mediæval manuscripts, etc., the forms and colors are conventional. There is much pattern, often great decorative splendor. The technique is always outline filled in with pure, bright, flat color. Primitive art is picture-writing, story-telling. It is symbolic—that is, full of meaning, almost nothing but meaning.

When we come to the second stage, represented by Greek sculpture and Renaissance art, both painting and sculpture, we find a growing regard for construction, proportion, and modeling (= in painting light and shade). Ornament is used sparingly and is much subordinated. There is little or no color. The subject-matter is still important, though not so all-important as before.

The third stage—which we may call "modern," though there were suggestions of it in the Venetian painting of the later renaissance—is marked by broad effect (Barbizon school); by devotion to superficial aspect (Bastien Lepage); there is no outline (Manet, Monet, Sisley) and little modeling (Lepage); considerable regard for tone (Carrière, Henner), and for effects of light (Manet) and atmosphere (Roche). The subject does not matter.

Though in the past these periods have succeeded and largely obliterated each the preceding one, there need have been no necessary antagonism. Each might have come, not to destroy, but to fulfil the other. This will be the task for the painter of the future. Saving all the decorative splendor and depth of meaning of primitive art, he will add to it the scientific exactness of statement of the middle period, and to that again the grace of the lighter touch and broader handling of the moderns.

And the little folks come into this technical tradition of the past, but they must make it their own in a definite order and sequence, it seems to me.

We have seen, then, that mass-drawing is impressionistic drawing; that it has come to the schools from the studios of Paris, and that it represents a very advanced and late stage of artistic seeing.

The impressionists themselves in their youth worked in a

very different way. Degas, for example, one of their leaders, painted, as, indeed, did Corot and Turner, in a very detailed and exact manner, arriving at his broad style late in life. There seems to be a natural process of development here.

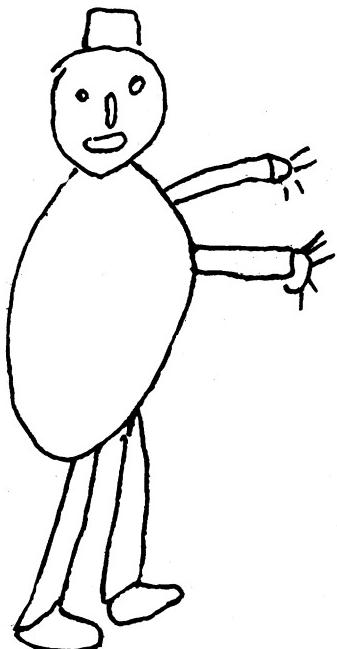


FIG. I.

As we saw the race advancing through a long period of close constructive drawing to the rendering of the aspects of things, from the expression of knowledge of local form and color to the mastery of appearance, so we can trace the growth of the individual artist through a stage when he is making an exact inquiry into the anatomy of form and color, till he reaches the point when he can add the last grace of surface shimmer.

If we attempt to force the student to render these effects, textures, and qualities before he has got a good grasp of structure, his natural growth is arrested. He is lost in the complexities of seeming, and has no clue to the mysteries of form. His work is blotchy and vain. This is the error that has crept into the schools.

There are no outlines in nature. What is outline? It is a line drawn around the contours of things defining the limitations of the form—the boundary line of the mass. The child, when he draws his symbol of a man, does not think of the line. In drawing the almost circular body with a sweep of his hand, he is drawing a portly man, and that is his embonpoint. He

is thinking of the bulk of him. There is a recognition of the mass, though the third dimension is not grappled with.

I believe the child, after he has passed through the scribble or purely symbolic stage, comes to something like our diagram. He states a few of the facts about the human form. This grows by the addition of more facts into some semblance of the form. This process should be continued until we have the drawing of a Leonardo.

Little by little some attempt may be made to deal with the modeled surface. The nose in front view, rendered by lines, is never satisfactory. It cannot be made to project without some gross anomaly, either by putting it to the one side or the other, or up, or down. And the eyes are expressionless unless there is some suggestion of the projection of the brows, and this can only be done by darkening the space under the eyebrows. The line of the underlid, too, asserts itself too much and must be suppressed or eliminated altogether. So, instead of the arrangement shown in Fig. 2, we have that of Fig. 3, the upper lid darkened to suggest that the eye is set in, instead of on, the face, and the under lid taken away. I think I can remember my own first experiments



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

in shading, and that the nose and the eye first made the demand upon me for a fuller method of representation than mere lines could afford.

So the power of representation grows; at first a shadow hinted at here and there, though the greater part of the drawing is in outline or in flat-tinted spaces. By and by the student sees the half-lights and nuances of shade, and his drawing grows to fuller and fuller realization; and at last he may dispense with the outline altogether.

The first great advance is made by the child when he emerges from mere scribbling to some sort of definite statement of the form as he conceives it. "The child's difficulty at this period seems to be the struggle to subordinate the motor elements to the visual elements. Only when the latter are in control of the former can the child really draw." Here everything that makes

toward scribbling must be regarded as a danger. While drawing is a severe exercise of the intellect and will, scribbling is the expression of vacuity of mind and purpose.

The rendering of tone—making the coat or hair black, for example—is best done with the brush. The flapping of the pencil backward and forward in fatuous shading is a kind of dissipation and leads back by an easy road to scribbling. We have seen drawings not a few by upper-grade children who have lapsed in this way, covering foolish drawing with a pretense of clever sketchiness and with cheap effects of tone. The teacher should help the child to clarify and define his ideas and his style, and discourage the use of subterfuges and lazy short-cuts. Of course there is a danger of quite an opposite kind to be looked out for as well. The little one may arrive at a convention that is satisfactory and definite enough as far as it goes, but does not go far enough, and may repeat this convention indefinitely, making no advance upon it. Here the teacher must enlarge the pupil's conception of things and stimulate the development of his conventions.

Some would have us believe that children begin with outlines because these are the natural outcome of the material they have to work with. The pencil is given into their hands, and they can draw lines only with a pencil. That argument would not explain the use of outlines by primitive peoples. They could more readily get colored earths and dyes than sharp points to draw with, and yet we find that they set about inventing them, and drew their outlines, and would be satisfied with nothing else. And, after all, a pencil can be used to get impressionistic effects. It can be employed to express surfaces and textures and qualities, if the artist especially cares for them, no less than it can silhouette. See the work of Charles Keene and Joseph Pennell, for instance. A still harder instrument, the etching needle, is the favorite tool of the impressionists. Invented by Rembrandt, an impressionist before his time, it has been used long and lovingly by tone artists like Whistler and Haden.

The use of outlines is not, however, confined to primitive folk and children. Artists who have acquired the technique for the

presentation of the most advanced knowledge of form often employ this method of drawing. Turner, the very fountain-head of impressionism, "whose chief virtue and skill in his finished works seemed to consist in losing it," drew in outline constantly. Ruskin, who arranged and classified the water-color drawings of Turner for the National Gallery of London, states that Turner made at least a hundred drawings in pencil outline for one that he touched in color. He goes on to say:

Nor is it ever possible to distinguish any difference in manner between outlines intended for color, or only for notation. In every case the outline is as perfect as his time admits, and in his earlier days, if his leisure does not admit of its perfection, it is not touched with color at all. In later life, when, as he afterwards said of himself, in woeful repentence, "he wanted to draw *every thing*," both the lead outline and the color dash became slight enough, but never inattentive; nor did the lead outline ever lose its governing proportion to all subsequent work.

Further on he says:

I have therefore given you this plate not so much for an immediate model as to show you the importance of outline even to a painter whose chief virtue and skill seemed, in his finished works, to consist in losing it. How little this was so in reality you can only know by prolonged attention, not only to his drawings, but to the natural forms they represent.

In another place he says, speaking of the same master:

It was commonly thought that he was great only in coloring, and could not draw; whereas his eminent distinction above other artists, so far as regards execution, was in his marvelous precision of graphic touch, disciplined by practice of engraving, and by lifelong work with the hard pencil-point on white paper.

The most advanced artists use outline in the earlier stages of their work—in the planning of their pictures, I mean. Their first sketch is usually a pencil jotting. Among figure painters the practice, I may say, is universal. See the sketches of Raphael, Michael Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci, or in our own time of G. F. Watts, Burne-Jones, and Puvis de Chavannes. Why do they do so? Because this method is most economical of time and material. With a stroke of the pencil they can convey more than with many dabs of the brush. One can make some semblance of a man without lifting the tool from the paper, running around the edge of him.

And here, I think, we come upon one of the strongest reasons why children and primitive folk use outline. They want, in the intensity of their impulse, to get at their ends by the readiest way. They do not have time to begin in the center and work out carefully to the edges; they cut out the forms in the quickest way, and that is by running their pencil line around them, filling them in afterward, when there is leisure to give to less vital matters, adding the splendor of fine color.

Little children, then, should be allowed to draw outlines because—

1. They are unable to grapple with the third dimension and can get on very well without it. To insist upon it is to balk and befuddle them, and so stop their genuine expression at the fountain-head.

2. Their proper progress is toward more defined statement, and outline drawing calls for that, every touch meaning something particular, whereas tone may stand for either local color, texture, light and shade, or atmosphere, or something altogether vague and silly, and the young artist's intention is unreadable because unmeaning—"signifying nothing."

3. Outline drawing is the most direct and economical mode of drawing, and lends itself best to the hot impulse of youth and creative genius.

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